

Supporting the **GROWTH** of **Effective Professional Learning Communities**



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Districtwide



Teachers do not magically know how to work with colleagues; districts must support and lead that work if PLCs are to live up to their potential.

By Rebecca A. Thessin and Joshua P. Starr

When business professionals and company executives are asked what skills they look for in recent graduates, they most often mention problem-solving skills and the ability to work in teams. Researchers agree that these skills are necessary for success in a global marketplace (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Murnane and Levy 1996; Toch 2003). Yet, as we try to provide more classroom opportunities for students to learn how to solve problems collaboratively, we aren't paying enough attention to an important, related goal — the need for teachers to learn to do the same.

Students are only one part of an ingrained system of schooling in our country that has emphasized individual achievement and survival of the fittest for much of the last century. Teachers have also learned to close their classroom doors in order to innovate and succeed independently while presiding over their own classroom kingdoms (Elmore 2004; Tyack and Cuban 1995). Now, in the face of increased accountability and districts' desires to



A SOPHISTICATED PRIMER

improve educator effectiveness, many school systems are implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) to support teachers in collectively using assessment data and student work to identify instructional strategies to meet students' learning needs. As schools and districts race to implement PLCs to provide teachers with



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Elements of the Stamford PLC Cycle

Inquire – Research It

PLC members will read/research the instructional area of focus that they strive to address.

Analyze Data

Analyze available data in the instructional area of focus to identify the learner-centered problem to be addressed. Specific data that might be examined include results or outcomes from state tests, common departmental or grade-level assessments, nationally normed tests, classroom observations, number of failures in classes, and GPA.

Look at Student Work

Examine examples of student work (beyond standardized assessments) that may provide a clearer picture of student thinking and understanding within the focus area.

Examine Instruction

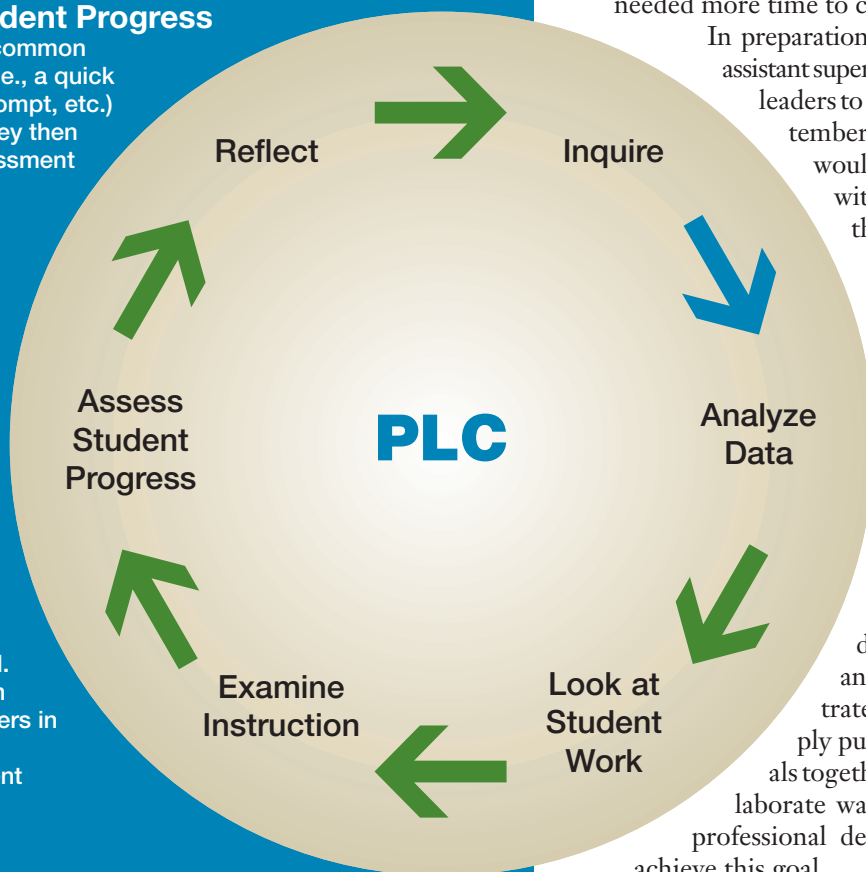
The learner-centered challenge is reframed as a challenge of practice. PLC members observe one or more teachers (one of the PLC members) providing instruction by using a protocol developed to address the instructional area of focus. Teachers provide feedback to the presenting teachers and debrief the observational process.

Assess Student Progress

Teachers give common assessments (i.e., a quick quiz, writing prompt, etc.) to students. They then grade the assessment and determine areas in which reteaching and review may be necessary.

Reflect

Teachers reflect on their teaching and student progress in the targeted instructional area and establish an action plan for moving forward. This action plan supports teachers in monitoring and adjusting student learning.



time to collaborate, they are also realizing that learning how to work in teams does not just magically happen. Districts must be deliberate in their efforts to teach teachers how to collaborate.

A school's existing capacity to do collaborative work before introducing PLCs and the readiness of school leaders to engage in this work greatly influenced PLCs' growth.

Stamford (Conn.) Public Schools introduced PLCs in the district's 20 schools in the 2007-08 school year (Year 1 of PLC work). PLCs were part of an overall system redesign led by Supt. Joshua P. Starr and supported by a grant from the G.E. Foundation Developing Futures Program. PLCs were established in response to teacher comments that they needed more time to collaborate with peers.

In preparation for PLC work, the district's assistant superintendents worked with school leaders to ensure that, beginning in September 2007, teachers at every school would have time to meet weekly with other teachers to discuss their practice. "Both the middle and elementary school schedules actually included common planning periods for teams or grade levels, but the focus was on planning field trips and events. Now, the collaboration had to be on how to support and improve student achievement," said Deputy Supt. Winifred Hamilton.

But teachers sat together during PLC time confused and, in some cases, even frustrated by this new direction. Simply putting well-meaning individuals together and expecting them to collaborate was not enough. They needed professional development and guidance to achieve this goal.

How could the central office support teachers in

making the shift from planning activities to having conversations focused on instruction? Stamford learned from both its successes and its missteps. By the third year of implementation, we had identified the critical responsibilities for district leaders if PLCs were going to operate successfully.

When implementing PLCs systemwide, districts play four key roles:

- Ownership and support — Districts must involve teachers and administrators in developing and leading the PLC process;
- Professional development — Districts must teach administrators and teachers how to work together effectively in PLCs;
- Clear improvement process — Districts must show how PLCs fit into the district's improvement process so that each PLC's work fits into an overall plan; and
- Differentiated support — Districts must support schools according to their unique needs in order to help them move to the next step in their PLC growth.

OWNERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Districts must involve teachers and administrators in developing and leading the PLC process.

Creating a districtwide PLC Steering Committee helped provide central office direction and support in PLC development while also including teachers in the process. Initially, the steering committee consisted mostly of district and school administrators, but by the beginning of the 2008-09 school year (Year II of PLC work), the committee included one teacher or administrative representative from each of the district's 20 schools plus representation from the central office.

The PLC Steering Committee also became its own districtwide PLC. Elizabeth DeSantis, a teacher at Julia A. Stark Elementary School, said her role on the steering committee contributed to her own learning as well. "Being a member of the steering committee has greatly enhanced my understanding of the PLC process. Sharing our experiences among the schools allows each of us to view professional learning communities more globally by sharing successes and challenges from our own school communities and then bringing back suggestions and encouragement from colleagues at other buildings, grade levels, and fields of expertise. Working side by side with administrators has also allowed me to view the PLC process from a fresh viewpoint," she said.

Furthermore, these teacher and administrator

representatives recommended next steps for the central office in the districtwide PLC work. Committee members developed the district's Year II and Year III PLC plans; piloted and then improved protocols, templates, and guidelines to be used by teachers in PLCs; and served as liaisons between the district-level work and their own school sites. Central office team members determined how best to support the development and growth of PLC work largely from this committee's recommendations, thereby allowing district leaders to focus on meeting the real needs of teachers in PLCs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Districts must teach administrators and teachers how to work together effectively in PLCs.

We kicked off Year I of PLC implementation at the August 2007 administrators' retreat by initiating a book study on PLCs with central office and building administrators. Both internal and external consultants provided expertise and guidance throughout the year. The initial plan was to allow schools with some PLC practices in place to continue with their current work, while preparing administrators new to PLCs to support teachers in beginning to learn together.

This meant that during Year I, administrators learned more about what a PLC is and what it does, but it also meant that many teachers sat down for PLC time with neither the knowledge of what they should be doing nor a clear goal. The superinten-

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dent's desire to allow some autonomy to schools in Year I led to more confusion among teachers than initially anticipated. As the district prepared for Year II, we knew that teachers needed to learn the skills to facilitate their own professional learning. Results of a teacher survey in November 2007 also indicated that PLC practices varied widely across schools. Teachers and administrators across the district wanted more direction and support.

As a result, we introduced PLC facilitators' training sessions at the beginning of Year II, the 2008-09

school year, with the support of the G.E. Foundation Developing Futures Program. Interest in the training sessions was overwhelming. To meet the expressed need, we offered eight voluntary, six-hour sessions on Saturdays, holidays, and after school during the 2008-09 school year so that teachers could be trained to facilitate and contribute to the work of their own PLCs.

“The PLC facilitators’ training sessions were empowering experiences. They laid a foundation for what’s possible when educators come together with a common focus and shared understanding of how to become more effective at what we do,” said Mark Woodard, then a teacher and now an assistant principal in Stamford. In addition to building ownership and understanding of PLC work, the district then had administrative and teacher leaders at each school site to teach colleagues the Stamford PLC improvement process.

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By the end of the 2008-09 school year, 260 of the district’s 1,400 teachers had participated in the training sessions and were asking for more. Teachers who had completed the first training session were asked to consider attending a two-day level-2 training to learn how to lead professional development sessions on PLCs, in collaboration with administrators, at building sites. In the level-2 trainings, teachers in high-functioning PLCs also shared their knowledge and interest in building collaborative learning teams schoolwide.

“My school team was so motivated that we continued to meet during the summer, and we created a PowerPoint presentation on instructional goal setting and action planning, which we presented to our faculty at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year. The resulting goals and action plans in 2009 were more in line with our school improvement plan and reflected a better understanding of how teachers can collaborate to improve student learning,” said Heather LaLanne, a teacher at Westover Elementary

School who attended and presented at the level-2 training.

After the first level-2 training with teachers, we shifted our PLC professional development focus for administrators from “what is a PLC” to specific instruction on “how to lead PLC work.” We now realize that districts and schools planning to implement PLCs should provide administrators and teachers with sufficient training in Year I to ensure that both administrative and teacher leaders are prepared to lead PLC work at their school sites.

CLEAR IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Districts must show how PLCs fit into the district’s improvement process so that each PLC’s work fits into an overall plan.

The confusion and questions that arose during Year I made it clear that Stamford needed a districtwide framework to guide PLCs. Holcomb (2001) and Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino (2008) indicate that an inquiry process can help facilitate change. David Garvin and his colleagues even identify learning processes as one of the key “building blocks of the learning organization” (2008: 110).

To develop a process that would help teacher teams become learning teams, the districtwide PLC Steering Committee examined a number of existing improvement processes, such as the Data Wise model (Boudett, City, and Murnane 2005), the Data Team model (Leadership and Learning Center, 2008), and the team learning process described by Richard DuFour and his colleagues (2004). We borrowed ideas from each of these models to design our own Stamford PLC Process: Inquire, Analyze Data, Look at Student Work, Examine Instruction, Assess Student Progress, and Reflect.

In addition to including an improvement process to guide the work of PLCs, the Year II plan established the district’s theory of action for PLC work: “If teachers and administrators work together to address student needs by engaging in a continuous process of instructional improvement, then teaching and learning will benefit, thereby leading to improved student achievement.”

The Year II plan also required each school to establish math and literacy instructional goals that were aligned to their state-mandated and locally approved school improvement plans. While elementary schools set school-level goals, middle and high schools established instructional goals for subject area departments. “When teachers establish an instructional goal, they bring purpose and accountability to their PLC work. And by articulating the goal together, they identify what they intend to do in order to improve student learning,” said Kathy Mason,

Stamford's external consultant.

Certainly, using the district's PLC framework did not radically change PLCs in Stamford overnight. But, as districtwide teacher survey results showed in spring 2009, about 56% of Stamford teachers said they were familiar with the Stamford PLC Process and 72% of teachers said they set an instructional goal to guide their work. In designing and implementing this process, central office staff, PLC Steering Committee members, and school administrators all played an important leadership role in clarifying the real work of PLCs districtwide.

DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT

Districts must support schools according to their unique needs in order to help them move to the next step in their PLC growth.

Shirley Hord indicates that learning "is a habitual activity where the group learns how to learn together continuously" (2009: 40). In Stamford, during our first year of implementation, we learned that teachers needed help forging PLCs that would foster this continued learning. By Year III, we had recognized that schools' needs for support varied widely across the district.

To provide teachers with both team-building resources and skills, in Year II we developed and distributed a PLC toolkit that included articles and protocols for each of the six steps of the Stamford PLC process. The PLC Steering Committee also developed tools that PLCs across the district could use: an Instructional Goals Template, a PLC Minutes Template, an Action Plan Template to assist PLCs in planning their work to reach a goal, and a PLC Rubric that PLCs could use to assess their own development. These templates were developed in response to an expressed need for structure in PLC work and in an attempt to share best practices identified by the PLC Steering Committee. At the end of Year II, we also began to film "PLCs in Action" in Stamford to share PLC learning more effectively across schools.

Despite developing the Stamford model, offering professional development, and providing team-building tools, a districtwide survey at the end of Year II revealed that many schools were still struggling. It became clear that both a school's existing capacity to do collaborative work before introducing PLCs and the readiness of school leaders to engage in this work greatly influenced PLCs' growth. Therefore, in preparation for Year III, we developed a differentiated PLC support plan to move PLCs to the next level of work at individual school sites.

The extensive data we collected during Year II assisted us in developing a plan for differentiated sup-

port. These data included results of the districtwide teacher survey, reflections on the PLC process submitted by teachers across the district, observations of PLCs by central office administrators, and school participation levels in the districtwide PLC facilita-

**Stamford's recommendation:
Lead PLC work with clear expectations and provide differentiated supports in the first year.**

tors' training sessions. After conferencing with principals at each school and analyzing our data, administrators at two schools began working with central office staff to implement peer observation practices with their PLCs. Another school received support in planning school-based professional development sessions to assist PLCs across the school in identifying grade-level and department-specific instructional goals to guide teachers' work.

We recognized how greatly the needs for support of PLC growth varied in Year III of PLC work, but districts now initiating PLC work for the first time should consider providing targeted support in Year I. It is certainly still imperative for districts implementing PLCs to provide clear direction and expectations to teachers at all schools engaging in this work. However, it's also necessary to assess schools' starting points so that the learning needs of individual teacher teams can be met, just as teachers themselves differentiate to meet their students' needs in the classroom.

MOVING FORWARD

Stamford's results show that PLC time has enabled teachers to work together and make a difference for their students. The 2009 Connecticut Mastery Test results illustrated strong improvements in achievement, especially in grades 6 and 8 in math, grades 5 and 8 in reading, and grade 8 in writing. Particularly, white, black, and Hispanic students showed higher overall achievement in the percentage of students scoring at or above "goal" when compared to students' performance statewide. In 2010, Stamford students' performance on Connecticut's state test continued on an upward trend, particularly in math. In grades 3, 5, and 8, the gain in the percentage of students who scored at or above goal in

Stamford exceeded gains by the state. Overall, since the 2006-07 school year, math scores improved by 13% in grade 5 and 15% in grade 6.

No one reform can be cited for Stamford's improvements, but teachers clearly believe that PLCs have helped them improve their practice. "PLCs have afforded us dedicated time on a weekly basis to discuss and share best practice strategies with colleagues in order to meet the individual needs of students. Prior to having this time, we had no way to

Based on our successes and our own learning through this process, we encourage other districts implementing PLCs to lead PLC work with clear expectations and provide differentiated supports in the first year. Like students, adult learners who are engaging in problem solving and teamwork for the first time need differentiated supports to ensure that they can work together effectively to meet their students' learning needs. By providing teachers with the time to collaborate and the necessary supports to build high-functioning learning teams, districts and schools can begin to ensure that teachers become effective team members and, as a result, effective instructors in the classroom. **K**

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learn what a teacher who may have had a lot of success in teaching a specific skill had actually done in the classroom to yield those results," said Amy Bel-dotti, an elementary learning needs coach and a member of the PLC Steering Committee.



"That's it? That's your teacher recruitment plan?"

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